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Young People's Self-Making in Neoliberal Capitalism: Challenges and Opportunities

by Stephen M. Butler and Nathaniel Coward | Issue 13.2 (Fall 2024), Political Economy and the Arts

ABSTRACT This paper charts the development of young people's self-making in neoliberal capitalism, specifying relationships between their self-making and susceptibility to mental health difficulties as they make their way in neoliberal market society. While neoliberal capitalism provides young people with opportunities to pursue and experiment with diverse identities and ways of being in the world, it also structures their self-making opportunities, by which charting selfhood becomes fertile ground for internalizing mental health problems. Our paper argues that the cultural imperative on young people to attain social status and success in the competitive and achievement-oriented forms of life that inhabit neoliberal capitalism demands that they curate and commodify highly desirable forms of selfhood that can never quite be realized. Endlessly failing to satisfy the conditions of selfhood in neoliberal capitalism, exhausted by the injunction to be more than they have already achieved, young people are socialized into increasingly complex and pressurized neoliberal capitalist cultures which challenge their ability to fulfill both their extrinsic desires for status and identity enhancement and their intrinsic needs for relatedness, belongingness, and self-worth. To conclude our paper, we summarize our main arguments and make some recommendations for promoting a more beneficial relationship between young people and the culture of neoliberal capitalism.

KEYWORDS capitalism, identity, neoliberalism, self, self-optimization, youth

Introduction

In the twenty-first century, modern, market-based economies and their accompanying individualistic and extrinsically oriented value structures have spread throughout much of the world.[1] While it is perhaps a truism to state that children and young people's development will be shaped by the world in which they live, albeit in complex and diverse ways, relatively little consideration has been given to relationships between neoliberal capitalist cultures and young people's mental health and well-being. As documented by cultural psychologist Carl Ratner over a decade ago, capitalism and its variants had appeared in only 14 article abstracts in all major psychology journals combined in the preceding 119 years.[2] He concluded that, "nobody is talking about the fact that nobody is talking about capitalism." In the decade since Ratner's observations, there has been a growing literature on the impact of neoliberal market economies on human development in the social sciences.[3] However, this literature is only starting to emerge in relation to mental health and well-being,[4] and typically does not consider links between young people's mental health and their strivings to find a place in the highly competitive and achievement-oriented neoliberal capitalist cultures in which they live.

Neoliberal capitalism promotes self-interest and interpersonal styles rooted in competition, a strong desire for financial success, high levels of consumption, and belief in the necessity of economic growth.[5] It has been associated with the rise of extrinsic values such as individualism, materialism, and status-seeking, which have intensified over the last 40–50 years in consumer economies.[6] The dominance of extrinsic values is consequential: when young people show disproportionate extrinsic relative to intrinsic values there is increased risk for mental health problems such as anxiety and depression, and poorer well-being.[7]

Critically, as Ratner pointed out, capitalism disguises itself as a culture, with its emphasis on individualism and private ownership of resources obscuring its own

social organization and influences on human development. For example, in neoliberal capitalist cultures, young people's development and well-being occurs in differentiated and competitive social environments where opportunities and access to resources are unequally distributed,[8] and often stratified by region, race, ethnicity, gender, ability, and socio-economic differences.[9] These foundational inequalities are believed to be an inescapable part of capitalist social and cultural relations, leading to uneven life chances for many young people with consequences for their mental health and well-being.[10] Even when these social inequalities are brought to people's attention, empirical studies suggest that individuals who live in neoliberal capitalist cultures believe that its market-based system is inherently fair, legitimate, and just.[11]

In this text we understand performance as the performance of self in everyday life and consider the effects of neoliberal capitalism on such performance. Our analysis is focused on relationships between young people's self-making in complex modern market cultures and their mental health and well-being. In particular, we seek to understand the growing presence of internalizing difficulties (i.e., emotional problems tied to the self) in many young people's lives, namely experiences of anxiety, depression, loneliness, and low self-worth.[12] Epidemiological studies suggest that internalizing symptoms are relatively stable during childhood and increase during adolescence and young adulthood.[13] Internalizing difficulties create a substantial burden of suffering for young people, with a prevalence of 32% of anxiety disorders and 14.3% mood disorders in youth from 13 to 18 years old.[14] There is growing documentation and concern that internalizing problems in young people are on the rise,[15] especially in neoliberal capitalist countries.[16] In a relatively recent population-based study of Swedish youth spanning from 1981 to 2014, Blomqvist and colleagues (2019) report that both those identifying as girls and those identifying as boys showed increasing internalizing problems while conduct problems decreased.[17] This aligns with interdisciplinary research such as the theoretical work of Byung-Chul Han, which aptly describes our shift from a Foucauldian disciplinary society predicated on

prohibitions and commandments that can lead to delinquency and deviance for those who fail to fit in, to an achievement-society predicated on an excess of positivity that results in labels of “depressives and losers” for those that cannot compete and produce.[18] These converging findings, documenting increasing emotional difficulties and theorizing the pressures of living in the highly competitive and achievement-oriented environments, prompt us to consider links between the social organization of neoliberal capitalism and internalizing difficulties in young people.

Self-Making in Highly Competitive and Achievement-Oriented Forms of Life

To confront this trend of increasing internalizing problems, Blomqvist and colleagues suggest that we need a deeper understanding of the impact of the major societal changes of the past three decades on young people’s mental health and well-being.[19] We suggest that the commanding influence of extrinsic values in a highly competitive socio-economic context are linked to the reconfiguration of young people’s psychosocial and interpersonal processes, the use of technology, and the ambient socio-ecological conditions that inform their development and their self-making. Today, young people’s sense of self is developing in neoliberal capitalist cultures where accession to adulthood roles are delayed,[20] greater emphasis is placed on their ability to access higher education and/or job skills training,[21] families are smaller and subject to greater structural instability,[22] and the entertainment, fashion, and sporting industries have become important socializing influences.[23] Young people’s prolific use of technology, exemplified by social media, develops individualistic behaviors, attitudes, values, and self-focused aspirations such as garnering social recognition and fame.[24] Overall, the diminished normative structures and shifting socialization influences toward extrinsic values and metrics, exacerbated by greater social inequality and

uncertainty in the labor market, makes self-making more complex and the passage to a functional adulthood more precarious.[25]

Young people's self-making in the highly competitive and achievement-oriented forms of life is responsive to socio-ecologies of self-optimization. The notion of a *form of life* is adopted from the literature on affordances and embodied cognition, which is defined as "a set of behavioral patterns, relatively robust on socio-cultural and biographical time scales, which is characteristic of a group or population."[26] Young people's growing participation in unending status competitions and the pursuit of social success are integral to highly competitive and achievement-oriented forms of life.[27] *Self-optimization* may be defined as the acquisition and development of the skills, means, and resources necessary to enhance the probability of attaining social status and success.[28] In the socio-ecologies of neoliberal capitalism, young people become invested in their self-optimization and in the positional aspects of self-making, fostering their ability to establish their social standing and to develop socially and economically productive lives in highly competitive and achievement-oriented forms of life.

With the dominance of modern market cultures globally, population studies reveal parental shifts toward greater investment in fewer children so parents can optimize their children's embodied capital (e.g., physical health, intelligence, knowledge and skills, social status, and networks) for them to compete successfully and achieve status.[29] The development of young people's self-optimization extends beyond parental investment to include a broader socio-ecology that is designed to invest in young people's embodied capital and therefore equip them to become productive and successful adults.[30] These broader social investments in young people's embodied capital are made by non-kin adults such as teachers, coaches, and counsellors, and social institutions such as school and governmental provisions in areas like education and healthcare that vary within and across Western nations.[31]

Young people's ability to benefit from socio-ecologies that support young people's self-optimization are crucial. That is, young people's capacity to participate in educational and extracurricular activities, to thrive in technologically mediated environments, and to obtain necessary parental and social support and resources are highly consequential in their pursuit of the skills and knowledge necessary for them to meet environmental demands and maximize their life chances in neoliberal capitalist cultures. As noted above, however, the possibility for young people to self-optimize is often constrained by their limited access to critical material and psychological resources in the unequally distributed political economy of neoliberal capitalist nations.

Young People's Mental Health in Highly Competitive and Achievement-Oriented Forms of Life

Beyond outlining the socio-cultural and socio-economic threads that help us understand the impact of neoliberal capitalism on young people's mental health, we take Blomqvist and colleagues' suggestions for a cultural analysis one step further. We propose that we need to understand the overarching ideology and socio-cultural forms and practices of neoliberal capitalism that inform young people's self-making and mental health. In neoliberal capitalism, young people are pressured to self-commodify and to serve and outperform their peers in the marketplaces that define their world. While we realize that there is substantial empirical evidence into the host of individual, parent-child, familial, and social factors that place young people at risk for internalizing mental health problems,[32] we adopt a cultural interdisciplinary analysis that is conceptual and borrows from research as necessary.

To inform our interdisciplinary cultural diagnosis of the rising rates of internalizing problems in young people, we draw on Dutch psychiatrist Jan Hendrik van den Berg's *sociosis*.[33] Van den Berg claims that vulnerabilities to certain mental health disorders and issues are tied to the relational and socio-cultural contexts of a given historical period. For example, he argues that Sigmund Freud's insistence that individual neuroses were all related to sexual concerns cannot be divorced from the repressed sexuality and rigorous social mores of the second half of nineteenth-century Western Europe. The subject of Freud's time was continually confronting the subconscious cultural discourses of sexuality that were foreclosed during the Victorian era in Western Europe.

We can look at differing conceptions of sexuality and their proposed links to mental health as an example of the relationship between social organization and mental health disorders. Freud details a conception of Victorian sexuality grounded in repressed desires located in a deep intrapsychic realm, hidden from the subject and discoverable only in a relationship with an analyst. However, sexuality in neoliberal capitalism is visible, commodified, and mostly discoverable by competitive peer audiences participating in highly competitive modern market economies. In contrast to Freud's time, we see in young people's self-making a prominent focus on physical attractiveness, sexuality, and appearance ideals, which have become metrics of social success and ciphers of social recognition and popularity. These changing social attitudes toward sexuality help mark a shift in the type of mental health disorders most common to a given society and how we come to understand them.

Following van den Berg's insight that mental health disorders are the result of the relationships and organization of society rather than neuroses responding to repressed sexuality, we hypothesize that young people's increasing proclivities towards internalizing disorders are, in significant ways, responses to the intensifying cultural demands and pressures of neoliberal capitalism. Young people's mental health in this politico-economic system can be fruitfully

understood by locating the development of their internalizing problems in a period of intensifying global competition[34] and to outperforming one's peers to secure material and psychological resources.[35] The result is that young people are coerced into unending pursuit of social status and success co-extensive with highly competitive and achievement-oriented forms of life.

Young people's injunction toward self-optimization in their pursuit of extrinsically grounded social status and success is evolutionarily based, stage-salient, and culturally promoted.[36] Occurring during adolescence and early adulthood, young people turn toward high-status peers and figures of cultural prestige, often from popular culture, to guide them in their quest to find an optimal place in highly competitive and achievement-oriented forms of life. Unfortunately, these high-status attractors embody desirable but also curated and manufactured versions of extrinsic metrics of success largely unattainable by most young people. These metrics—physical attractiveness, high academic and extracurricular achievements, and displayed material success—have been termed market-driven criteria (MDC).[37] These status and identity-enhancing MDC have become integrated into social systems and function symbolically as individuals develop in complex market-based societies. For example, young people engage in status and identity-enhancing signaling of the MDC in competitive cultural environments such as on social media or in everyday interactions with their peers and others (e.g., young people posting acceptance letters from prestigious American colleges to signal elevated status).

Under intensifying competitive cultural pressures to develop optimal self-narratives of status, success, and self-image, young people may be prone to self-objectification, defining themselves from the outside-in, commensurate with extrinsic, quantifiable metrics (i.e., MDC). In turn, this objectified sense of self is often accompanied by judgmental peer social comparisons with adverse consequences for young people's mental health and well-being in offline and online contexts,[38] most likely via perceptions of subordinate status and

accompanying internalizing symptoms.[39] In the longer term, young people are left with limited and largely prescribed resources to help them develop a more accurate and positive self-image and subjectivity that incorporates awareness of their own growth and struggles (i.e., internal self-comparisons over time), and to accurately discover what they have to offer the world to meet environmental demands (i.e., more rounded self-objectification), in the hope of eventually fulfilling their intrinsic needs and living satisfying lives.

Qualitative accounts from young people themselves, and rigorous quantitative research, document unrelenting cultural pressures on young people to self-optimize in both their academic and extracurricular pursuits in highly competitive and achievement-oriented forms of life.

These research studies indicate that the criteria and performances required of young people are moving toward very unhelpful and potentially harmful extremes. In qualitative studies of young people's experience of high achieving schools in Australia and highly competitive equestrian training programs in Sweden, adolescents' personal accounts describe competitive pressures to display identities encapsulated by the terms "*super girl*" and "*super equestrian*."[40] The *super girl* pursues entrance into an elite college as her ticket to elevated status and future wealth, while the *super equestrian* signals the most desirable online identity, namely a rider who is attractive, wears the "right clothes," is successful, and "acts professionally." These personal accounts from young people in Australia and Sweden correspond with broader linear increases in young adults' reports of culturally prescribed perfectionism (i.e., perceived strong social pressures and expectations to be perfect) from 1989 to 2016 found in the neoliberal economies of Canada, the US, and the UK.[41] We hypothesize that striking rises in socially prescribed perfectionism are likely related to the elevations in symptoms of anxiety, depression, and suicidality seen in these countries. Similar to the notion of highly competitive and achievement-oriented forms of life advanced here,

young people's internalizing problems are linked to rising pre-occupations with competition and status-attainment in the industrialized world.

Notwithstanding these concerning developments, we underline that capitalism's impact on young people's lives does not only result in negative effects. We are strongly influenced by Stiegler's elaboration of the notion of *pharmakon* in capitalism.[42] That is, young people's self-making in neoliberal capitalism provides both opportunities and adversities, advantages and disadvantages, that cannot be separated from one another, as *pharmaka* can be both poison and cure. As a broad stroke, capitalism has led to great prosperity since the Second World War and has been of substantial benefit to well-being, providing levels of personal and political freedom, as well as infrastructure, health, and social provisions unheard of throughout most of human history.[43] The centrality of status and identity-enhancement in neoliberal capitalism is highly appealing, allowing for constant innovation and incorporation of an ever-widening range of status distinctions and potential identities. Under certain conditions and *for some people*, capitalism accommodates growing and diverse skill sets to meet societal demands. Evolutionary sociologist John Hammond describes how neoliberal capitalism elaborates an appealing status inflation that has become part of market societies.[44] For example, in academia, faculty have a growing series of metrics to signal their academic status and worth to themselves, their employers, and academic peers: publications, publications in high versus low impact journals, the international profile of their publications, holding grants varying in monetary worth, as well as citations, h-index, i-index, etc. Thus, the growing population has fueled the expansion and variegation of status and identity distinctions, accommodating an increasing number of individuals and groups. Whether it is the power of the advertising industry to promote and shape identities grounded in consumer goods that embody cultural trends, values, and beliefs, or the affordances offered by social media for young people to form identities in present-focused environments that stress individualization and that foreground MDC, neoliberal capitalism offers a flexible, plastic space for self-making. For

example, there are indications that LGBTQ+ youth find a sense of self-worth and belongingness on social media that is not available to them within family and even peer contexts within their schools or local communities.[45]

Young People Self-Making on Social Media: Struggles for Balance

Young people's responses to the peer and cultural pressures living in highly competitive and achievement-oriented forms of life can lead to engagement in unhelpful, harmful, and potentially destructive behaviours. Cultural trends encouraging young people to signal increasingly idealized or perfect embodiments of MDC follow a market logic of growth and competition, where performances of continuously improving, culturally promoted extrinsic metrics are necessary to continue securing recognition, belongingness, and self-worth.[46] Thus, as young people progressively strive to live productive and satisfying lives, they must negotiate the tension to balance their extrinsic market-driven strivings with fundamental intrinsic needs to feel worthy as human beings, to feel connected to others, and to believe that life is worth living.

The movement of young people's self-making toward extreme self-displays and self-performances is illustrated by their use of the technological and social affordances made available in the pharmacological space of social media. The pharmacological conception of social media (i.e., as a cultural space for either therapeutics or toxicities) is congruent with substantial empirical research documenting that patterns of associations between social media use and well-being in children and adolescents do not uphold mostly positive nor mostly negative effects, but rather underline the importance of how young people use social media as a space of self-performance, and how patterns of use and digital contexts inform mental health and well-being outcomes.[47]

Within this complex pharmacological setting, there is growing societal concern and effort to understand and address toxic and desperate acts such as online suicidality and self-harm.[48] These destructive online acts have been documented since the first ever live-streamed suicide by a young female named Océane, who displayed strong inclinations to achieve social recognition, if not online celebrity.[49] There is also the recent case of Eugenia Cooney, a social media influencer, whose online displays of anorexia nervosa have created a movement of "thinspiration" for her millions of followers across Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube.[50] In our individualistic capitalist culture, ego ideal fantasies driven by cultural imperatives seem to operate so strongly as to push people beyond the liminal realities of life and death.

To understand the tragic online experiences of Eugenia and Océane, we make use of ongoing theorizing that conceptualizes social media as a performance space. Incorporating the seminal ideas of Erving Goffman,[51] social media has been repeatedly framed as a stage[52] where performances transpire, and where, in performing, young people offer themselves up for critique. Online critiques from young people's performances can occur in sometimes dense and escalating feedback cycles that signal acceptance (e.g., likes) or rejection (negative or no response). By its very technological architecture, social media is a stage that solicits positive or negative critique from a highly expectant audience of peers. However, the difference between theatrical performances and Eugenia and Océane's performance-signaling on social media is that their characters inevitably collapse, and unavoidably become tied to who these young women actually are and were. Hence the mask becomes flesh. Young people's performances on social media cannot help but refer back to their embodied selves, full of longings, insecurities, and doubts, and complex feelings embedded in complex relationships. Unfortunately, the technologically mediated communicative space of social media is often deficient in its ability to capture, communicate, and converse around complex, nuanced, and ambiguous performances.

Conclusions

Young people's self-making in neoliberal capitalism reveals a distinct configuration of self, use of technology, and relationships to peer and broader culture environments. As we have described, young people are motivated by an incessant capitalist demand, a cultural superego, to achieve social status and success. Navigating competitive peer environments and cultural demands, young people leverage MDC in exploiting their talents and skills to garner social status and financial success. Pharmacologically speaking, neoliberal capitalism has been conceptualized as a highly appealing system where innovating societies require an increasing diversity of skills and potential identities from their populations.[53] On the other hand, young people are obliged to place their identities on the market, developing and performing self-narratives of success and enhanced self-image with MDC as their lingua franca. Young people's chances for finding status and success in neoliberal capitalism is greatly diminished if they do not play by the rules of the capitalist game. Unfortunately, the game comes with two rules. First, young players do not all start on the same square; that is, access to resources and opportunities are unequally distributed and are often stratified based on region, race, ethnicity, gender, ability, and socio-economic differences.[54] Second, one must continually try to win at the game, even to the point of exhaustion and even if the game is rigged. As sung by Uncle Tupelo, "You can't break even, you can't even quit the game."[55]

Self-making in neoliberal capitalism presents young people with opportunities but also challenges and adversities through which they seek to develop financially productive and emotionally satisfying lives. To return to the beginning, van den Berg himself noted that while the factors of a specific social organization and historical epoch affect everyone, only a limited number of people will show mental health symptoms and disorder.[56] Research to date suggests that young people's susceptibility to cultural imperatives to achieve status and social success via

signaling of status-driven MDC, and thus susceptibility to greater risk for internalizing difficulties, is influenced by the degree to which they are invested in these metrics, perceive that they must conform to peer and cultural pressures to perform them, or show a relatively unintegrated self-concept more susceptible to cultural capitalist demands.[57]

As pithily expressed by Han, the new commandment of late-modern societies is the imperative to achieve.[58] We have documented that young people perceive enormous cultural pressures and expectations on themselves and their peers to perform at the highest level of achievements in their academic and extra-curricular pursuits, embodied by the term "super selves." Qualitative and quantitative research document that the current demands of highly competitive and unequal capitalist cultures on young people are often unrelenting and increasingly seem unachievable. Young people must self-optimize in order to develop narratives of success and find their place in highly competitive and achievement-oriented forms of life. It is crucial to recognize that young people's self-optimization extends beyond the individual young person to their parents and families, schools, and the broader cultural field. Consequently, their self-optimization is embedded in both the provision and stratification of resources that facilitate and constrain human flourishing such as education, health, and mental health services. Convincing empirical data suggests that higher degrees of social inequality are associated with poorer mental health and well-being outcomes, which manifest across the socio-economic spectrum.[59]

As young people strive to self-optimize and fulfill the insistent demands of highly competitive and achievement-oriented forms of life, accumulating data suggests that the intense pressures to display status and achieve social success place some young people at risk for internalizing mental health problems. Young people's tendencies to engage in judgmental social comparisons in competitive environments,[60] and tendencies to endorse disproportionate investment in

extrinsic compared to intrinsic goals and values,[61] are two mechanisms by which these cultural pressures and demands translate into internalizing problems.

At the same time, we remain hopeful that young people have the capacities and can develop the knowledge and skills to negotiate and reckon with the pressures and potential toxic effects of neoliberal capitalism. To promote therapeutics as opposed to toxicities, what may be helpful now is to help young people face the challenges of evolving subjectivities that remain responsive to, and constrained *but not subsumed by*, predominant cultural values, norms, and expectations. This form of engagement in their own self-making can be a hopeful process that provides young people and their culture with opportunities to facilitate their mental health and well-being, i.e., to foster adaptive person-socio-ecology fits.

Young people developing in highly competitive and achievement-oriented forms of life require guidance and signposts. Scaffolding must be provided by the relationships and institutions of which they are part, namely families and education, health, artistic, athletic, and mental health systems.

As young people apply their increasingly sophisticated socio-cognitive skills and growing agency to facilitate person-ecology fits, cultural institutions bear equal responsibility to support this process. These cultural spaces must host interpersonal and socio-cultural factors that promote young people's well-being in highly competitive and achievement-oriented forms of life. Specifically, these cultural spaces must be protected from insistent pressures toward optimal and perfect self-making, the stigmatizing of diversities and mental health issues, and the pressures of poverty and intensifying social and economic inequalities.

Finally, it is incumbent on psychology and related disciplines involved in addressing young people's mental health and well-being to recognize and act on the cultural and interpersonal toxicities that may accompany neoliberal capitalism. We would call attention to the intensive competition and individualization that structure young people's relations to others, and, in a highly problematic turn, the

relationship that one develops with oneself. In other words, the paradox is that there is market-mediated competition between people over the relationships that they get to have with themselves as products in the marketplace. Despite a seemingly continual discourse on personal freedom in neoliberal capitalism, young people's relationships with themselves are predicated on their social standing in relation to how they are valued by others and their possession of the currency (i.e., MDC) that defines successful selves in neoliberal capitalism. Unfortunately, in the mental health disciplines as in the broader culture, the individual is revered while the underlying condition for mental health issues—the culture of individualism and competition which define self-making in highly competitive and achievement-oriented forms of life—is largely ignored. From our vantage point, and until a better politico-economic system addresses the problem at its core, addressing rising internalizing disorders in young people requires attention to their overbearing fear that failure to compete and to succeed is a failure of self and to oneself.

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Author Information

Stephen M. Butler

I am a child clinical psychologist by training and Professor in the doctoral clinical psychology training program at UPEI in Canada. I am also an Honorary Associate Professor at University College London (UCL), UK following 18 years employment in the doctoral training program in clinical psychology. My research interests are primarily in studying the mental health and well-being of children and adolescents, where I have contributed to both quantitative and qualitative studies. Over the last five years, I have been developing a conceptual and evidence-based framework to help understand the impact of socio-political and socio-cultural factors, a.k.a. capitalism, on child and adolescent well-being. This is my first collaboration with Nathaniel Coward and a welcome progression to writing a more interdisciplinary paper in this area.

View all of Stephen M. Butler's articles.

Nathaniel Coward

Nathaniel Coward is a PhD student in Educational Studies at the University of Prince Edward Island, with a background in theory and criticism. His research areas include theories of learning and development, reflexive models, and cross-cultural, comparative epistemology. Nathaniel’s previous graduate research focused on a phenomenological/existential model of human development, contextualizing specific experiences of “wonder” (*Thaumazein*) as indicative of the individual’s passage through communal and historical institutions that paradoxically reframe intersubjectivity without subjects. His current research is focused on addressing the urgent need to understand the role of education in resisting conspiracy-

driven, political division. This is his first collaboration with Dr. Stephen Butler and a welcomed opportunity to exercise more interdisciplinary thinking.

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